

## The British Empire and Commonwealth museum a year on

**Young visitors to one of Britain's newest exhibitions learn some uncomfortable but overdue lessons about their country's past.**

*Young journalists from Children's Express give their opinions of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum one year after it opened its doors to the public.*

When it comes to the subject of the British Empire, school seems to want to keep us stupid. Before we went to the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, we didn't know the extent to which Britain had a very profitable slave trade. On the way back from the museum we began to feel quite angry... Why aren't we being taught about the darker side of Britain's past?

We didn't know how many soldiers from far off countries fought on the side of the British in the Second World War because at the time those countries were under British rule. In the case of India, we didn't know that supplying troops to the war effort was one of the tools India used to bargain with Britain for its freedom, or how, through the Opium Wars, Britain came to govern Hong Kong.

Strangely, while schools are not teaching Empire history from the point of view of the colonised, the education programme at the museum is full to capacity. Dr Gareth Griffiths, director of the museum said: "There is clearly a demand for education programmes looking at aspects of this past and the cultural legacy of the empire and commonwealth." He added: "within the National Curriculum the commonwealth is an option under citizenship. At the moment it is not taken up much and I think this because teachers aren't comfortable teaching the subject." He said one reason for this was lack of resources and materials that will support a lesson.

For us it was an eye opening experience. On the train on the way to Bristol, we discovered one of us has Pakistani parents; one of us has Indian parents. One of us has a British father and a Jewish Israeli mother and one of us has an Australian mother and Palestinian father. What we know about Britain and its effects on where our parents were born is not what we learn in school, it is from our parents. Only talking to each other and visiting this museum made us notice we are all from war torn countries where Britain had some responsibility in the past, and because of that we were all on a trip together.

While we might have visited the museum because of our parents' backgrounds, what about young people whose parents were born and educated here? They have would little motivation to visit the museum on their own. We spoke to some young people from the Bristol branch of Fairbridge, an organisation that works with those who are not in education, training or employment.

Sean, 15, said: "What the British did to the Chinese in the Opium Wars is out of order. Maybe I would be interested in learning about that at school." He added: "They could tell you more about ordinary people, people living on the streets. I want to hear about what it was like gangster wise, about guns and stuff. I would never look at something about china plates. Why would I want to know about that? Kids then weren't interested in china plates. Why would they be interested now?"

Some of the museum's displays are interactive - you can try on clothes, touch computer screens and listen to people who lived through the Empire talk about their experiences. You can even smell spices and guess what they are. Sean said: "They could have simulators so you could walk around in that world, or a car or something." He likes Hip Hop and R'n'B music, but never realized that the black gangster culture he is so familiar with has roots in slavery. The museum could do more to show those connections.

When we told Dr Griffiths what Sean had said he responded: "I wouldn't disagree with that. I acknowledge there is only one area that looks at childhood in any great detail. I would plead that given the amount of space we have at the moment it is the most we can do."

Perhaps soon though, the museum will have as much space as it needs. On the graffiti wall in the last gallery of the museum someone left a post-it note with the statement: "Why not funded by the lottery? Disgraceful." Last week, the museum was finally awarded a £60,000 grant from the heritage lottery fund towards the next phase of its development. The money will go towards the planning of the museum's conversion of its huge hall into a flexible auditorium.

Dr Griffiths said: "It is the biggest space in the south west under one roof. I want to convert it into a space where we can explore the themes of the museum through music, drama and speech. I want to test us and explore the way in which we can engage different audiences who perhaps aren't interested in a formal exhibition." A Dizee Rascal concert perhaps?

Dr Griffiths said: "We see our role here to present that there are a number of viewpoints to the past and there is always a challenge to present voices not just from the colonizers but the colonized."

We think it is a challenge the museum is going some way to meeting. There are sound boxes with testimony you can listen to and a video at the end where people tell how they were affected by empire. There is also Commonwealth FM. Deborah Hodson, schools officer at the museum, said: "There is a radio club where young people can come in and do what they want. If they want to do something on Rap they can investigate what is in the museum about that, or what is in the oral history programme on that? They can do all of that stuff for Commonwealth FM, and they can broadcast live on air and get their families and friends to listen to it as well."

It also needs to present the voices of young people who are the result of all this - the young people whose parents are from all over the world and who are growing up in Britain today, who have the cultures of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

On the way back from the museum, we began to feel quite angry. The government celebrates multiculturalism; a multiculturalism we can now see is a product of empire. But that wasn't the purpose of empire. We never knew that before. We think being kept in the dark about history influences the way we might feel about topical issues such as asylum and war. Why aren't we being taught about the darker side of Britain's past? Guilt? Shame? Trying to keep hold of a sense of pride in being British? After our trip we thought the only way Britain's young people can have real sense of pride is if we can deal with the past and move on. Otherwise there is a part of our heritage, the very reason we are all growing up here that we can't be proud of.

On Friday the museum celebrates its first birthday. We could see it has achieved a lot in that year, and our birthday wish for it is that it can go on to raise more money and do even more to make sense of what we know about Britain. After all, if you are eighteen and going to University to study anything except perhaps history, it's a vital gap that otherwise probably will never be filled.

## About the team

This story was produced by Haifa Rashed, 18, Samir Pasha and Ella Parry-Davies, 14. It was published by the [24 Hour Museum](#).

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